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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: IBB ON THE FUTURE OF DOMESTIC POLITICS

Classified By: John Campbell, Ambassador, Abuja,  
Reason(s): 1.5 (b),(d)

1. (S) Summary: Former military ruler and possible future presidential candidate Ibrahim Babangida will make a final decision only in the Spring of 2006 about whether to run for president. He also expressed interest in establishing his own political party. He urged the U.S. and other major donors to play a major role in the 2007 elections, especially the preparation of registration lists. He described his political philosophy, which centers on devolution of power from the Federal government to the states, and called for a "Marshall Plan" to address the underlying problems of the oil-rich delta. He reaffirmed his belief that the next President of Nigeria should have a military background to ensure the survival of the Nigerian state. His biggest concern: that the rivalry between President Obasanjo and Vice President Atiku could lead to violence, the outcome of which would be unpredictable and potentially profoundly damaging to the Nigeria body politic. End summary.

2. (U) At his request, former Chief of State Ibrahim Babangida met with me at the residence on September 27. He relayed his wish to see me through National Security Advisor Aliyu Mohammed. He was accompanied by retired Air Vice Marshal Hamza Abdullahi, who had been the Minister of the Federal Capital Territory when Babangida was Chief of State. The Regional Affairs Counselor was also present. Babangida opened the conversation by expressing his condolences to the victims of hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

3. (C) With respect to the presidency in 2007, Babangida said that he had not made a final decision to declare his candidacy. Candidates, he continued, are "chosen" by "like minded men." But, whether he was a candidate or not, he said he was exploring the possibility of establishing a new political party which could govern if it won the presidency, serve as a loyal opposition if it lost. When pressed, as to whom he would support if he chose not to run, Babangida said that his candidate must be "a like minded friend" with a military background and international stature, someone "like" Aliyu Mohammed. (In passing, he confirmed that he had been one of Obasanjo's principal kingmakers in 1999.) However, he avoided saying specifically that the National Security Advisor would be his candidate, should he himself not run. He added that his candidate must not be afraid of the press, which he characterized as "irresponsible."

4. (S) Babangida said it was important to be "fair" to President Obasanjo and, in essence, take at face value the latter's statements that he will leave office at the end of his term in 2007. It would be very difficult, Babangida continued, to amend the constitution or otherwise make legally possible an Obasanjo third term. Babangida said that he, personally, believed in the presidential two-term limit. Any exception, he continued, could be contemplated only if the incumbent were an unqualified success. And President Obasanjo is deeply unpopular, as are the people around him. Vice President Atiku, he continued, had handled his own candidacy for the presidency poorly. Atiku acted as though the PDP nomination was his for the asking, and his increasingly public feud with the President was unseemly as they were part of the same administration. As Vice President, Atiku owned his undivided loyalty to the President. During a private aside with me at the close of the meeting, Babangida expressed concern that the struggle over the PDP between Obasanjo and Atiku could lead to violence. He quoted the President as saying that violence would be met with violence. But, Babangida said, once violence is unleashed, the consequences are unpredictable and have the potential for profoundly damaging Nigeria.

5. (C) If he were to be a candidate for President, Babangida said he would campaign in favor of a "Marshall Plan" for the Delta. The root causes of instability in that region, he continued, are poverty and under development. He also said that he favors devolving further powers from the Federal government to the states, in education, for example. He went on to say that in a country as diverse as Nigeria, there was no reason why all

the states needed the same institutions of government. With respect to the conduct of the 2007 elections, he urged the U.S. and other donors to take an active role, especially in the preparation of voter registration roles. He also argued that the results of the polling should be released by each local government area (LGA), rather than by any organ of the Federal government, to reduce tampering with the results. He acknowledged the importance of the 2007 elections to restoring public confidence in the democratic process in Nigeria.

16. (S) Comment: While I had met him several times when he was chief of state, this was my first meeting with Babangida since my return to Nigeria. He was articulate and urbane, and betrayed no appearance of aging. Though he was coy about his own presidential intentions, Hamza Abdullahi said flatly that Babangida will run. If this is correct, it could explain Babangida's reluctance to endorse on the spot the candidacy of Aliyu Mohammed. The posters throughout the country supporting his candidacy are solely the work of his "friends"--not him, Babangida said. However, nearly all observers think that he has built up the biggest campaign war chest of any of the contenders. His concern that the rivalry between Obasanjo and Atiku risks violence was striking--and delivering that warning appears to have been the principal purpose of the visit. Striking, too, was his continuing to see the military as the guarantor of the Nigerian state, and, hence, that the next President must have a military background. (Of all the declared presidential candidates, only Vice President Atiku does not.) He made all the right responses to my points about the need for the rule of law and transparency in elections. Though he was willing to talk about policy, e.g., the delta "Marshall Plan", devolution of more power to the states and the importance of Nigeria's international role, he appeared most interested in talking about the possibilities of a new political party. He would not allow himself to be drawn out on the problems of the North. Indeed, throughout our particular conversation, at least, Babangida showed remarkably little "fire in the belly" for actually fighting for the Presidency. End comment.

CAMPBELL